

Review: Petr Skalník et al., Czech and Slovak African Studies after 1960: A critical hindsight (2017)

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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Šváblová, A. (2018). Review: Petr Skalník et al., Czech and Slovak African Studies after 1960: A critical hindsight (2017). [Review of the book *Afrikanistika v českých zemích a na Slovensku po roce 1960: kritické ohlédnutí*, by P. Skalník]. *Africa Spectrum*, 53(2), 131-133. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-11373>

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Africa Spectrum

Šváblová, Alžběta (2018),
Book Review: Petr Skalník et al. (2017), *Afrikanistika v českých zemích a na Slovensku po roce 1960: kritické ohlédnutí*, in: *Africa Spectrum*, 53, 2, 131–133.

URN: <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-11373>

ISSN: 1868-6869 (online), ISSN: 0002-0397 (print)

The online version of this and the other articles can be found at:
<www.africa-spectrum.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of African Affairs,
in co-operation with the Arnold Bergstraesser Institute, Freiburg, and Hamburg
University Press.

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Book Reviews

Skalník, Petr et al. (2017), *Afrikanistika v českých zemích a na Slovensku po roce 1960: kritické ohlédnutí* (Czech and Slovak African Studies after 1960: A Critical Hindsight), Ústí nad Orlicí and Hradec Králové: Oftism, ISBN 978-80-7405-427-3, 336 pages

The book offers an overview of the evolution of African studies in the Czech and Slovak context over the past 50 years, focusing not only on institutional and scholarly developments within the discipline, but also on introducing leading personalities in the field and their works. An introduction by Petr Skalník opens the book and is followed by 16 chapters, which are divided into three parts: Studies and Discussions (seven chapters outlining the history and development of the discipline), Reminiscences (four chapters presenting the field from the more personal point of view of the authors), and Centres (five chapters introducing the centres of research in the region). There is also a selected – yet extensive – bibliography of Africanist works by Czech and Slovak authors published between 1960 and 2016. Some of the chapters include photographs.

The 20 contributors to the volume range from PhD candidates to established scholars and come from different parts of the globe. A peculiar aspect is the language policy of the publication, which includes Czech, Slovak, and English submissions. Although clearly driven by the focus on Czech and Slovak readers, the language choice actually limits the potential audience of the volume quite substantially.

The first part of the book outlines the development of African studies in Czechoslovakia and in the two successor states after separation (chapters by Petr Zima, Josef Kandert, and Getnet Tamene). Most of the contributions also situate and link Czechoslovak African studies to the broader international academic context (especially the chapters by Pavliková-Vilhanová and Petr Zima). Petr Skalník offers a well-informed overview of knowledge production on Africa in the broader context of Central Europe, focusing on Poland and Hungary. Maciej Kurcz portrays the challenges socialist scholars faced when embarking on field research, recounting the Polish expedition “Africa 76” to Cameroon and Mali.

The second section offers personalised perspectives, written by Otakar Hulec and Vladimír Klíma, on the beginnings of African studies at the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science in 1960s and 1970s, followed by the two English contributions to the volume. The first presents an intriguing story by Magdalena Hauner about

her career, leading from the Moravian town of Brno to a professorship in Wisconsin, where the narrative of private life is intertwined with the political dimension, which shaped the Czech scholar's professional path. The second gives an account of Ladislav Venyš's adventurous mission to Liberia and Sierra Leone in 1975.

The last part of the book introduces universities and research centres focusing on Africa: the Department of African Studies at the Philosophical Faculty of the Charles University in Prague, the Slovak Oriental Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, and the Department of Ethnology and Non-European Studies at the University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. This section also includes contributions on African studies in Naples and Vienna that are written by Czech and Slovak scholars based there.

As was the case elsewhere in the world, Czechoslovak African studies developed within the broader field of Oriental studies and gradually emerged as an autonomous discipline. Until the beginning of the 1960s, African studies formed an integral part of the Oriental Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science. In 1961, the five-year study programme for African Studies at the Philosophical Faculty of the Charles University in Prague was established, and by 1966, the first group of 11 students had graduated. The invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 and the following period of "normalisation" constituted a heavy blow to the study programme, which had practically ceased to exist by 1975. It re-opened for a short time after 1989, with a design similar to that of its predecessor – namely, a focus on linguistics, history, culture, and society in the tradition of German "Afrikanistik." However, despite an enthusiastic start, the study programme came to an end in the first decade of this century, mainly due to a lack of financial support and a shortage of qualified academic personnel.

Today, the prevalent approach to the study of Africa has shifted from the linguistic-history tradition to studies mostly related to political science and international relations. Currently, the biggest centre of African studies, designed in line with the latter trend, is located at the University of Hradec Králové. The second "niche" is the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, which also specialises in political science and international relations. Somewhat surprisingly, the book does not introduce either of the two centres.

The volume offers invaluable insights on the reality of doing research under the conditions determined by socialism. The political situation in communist Czechoslovakia dictated the focus of the research, the staffing of the research institutions, and the lives and careers of the

scholars. For most of this time, African studies developed in isolation – both from the subject of interest and from the rest of the world’s academic community. The international contacts of Czechoslovak scholars were limited to researchers in other socialist states, and possibilities for field research were few due to the scarcity of funding. Research stays were often partly self-financed and the enthusiasm of the scholars was the main driving force that helped them overcome bureaucratic as well as practical hurdles.

At least two critical points must be mentioned. First, the diversity of perspectives, themes, and fields of research result in a somewhat fragmented impression for the reader. The book offers a multifaceted mosaic of Czech and Slovak African studies rather than a systematic introduction. The volume would benefit from a concluding chapter that rounds it off and fills in (or at least acknowledges) the gaps. Second, a reflection on the current situation of the discipline, including challenges and prospects, could also have been included. For those familiar with the academic reality of the two countries, the problematic aspects are easy to guess. Apart from a lack of financial support and limited opportunities for career promotion after the PhD stage, the issue of mobility (e.g. attending conferences, visiting fellowships, or longer research stays) also impacts the small Africanist community.

Nevertheless, the book is definitely an interesting read and a useful resource for those interested in African studies and knowledge production on Africa in the Czech and Slovak context. The contributions offer a sound overview of the most important trajectories, moments, and characters in the field, something which has not been available in written form in any other publication so far. At the same time, the book presents a number of methodological insights about how science and knowledge production processes were undertaken only a few decades ago, under conditions sometimes difficult for scholars of today to imagine.

■ Alžběta Šváblová